

# Painting the Pope's Portrait

By WILLIS STEELL.

**P**IUS XI is under the impression that his portrait has been painted too often. He has sat for five artists and the result in some cases has not been satisfactory to him. This in part accounts for his delay in granting sittings to an American artist, Arnolfo Muller-Ury, who went to Rome in September charged with a double commission and apparently with every arrangement made before hand. But this artist, by birth an Italian-Swiss, happened unfortunately to be fifth in the series of painters of the Pope.

Mr. Muller-Ury, although kept waiting ten days before the Pope gave him an appointment, mastered his nervous fear and waited patiently, being constantly assured by Monsignor O'Hearn, rector of the American College in Rome, by the Maestro di Camera of the Pope's household and by Monsignor Caccia, major domo of the palace that the Pope made no positive objection but kept reiterating when reminded of the waiting artist: "Yes, yes, I know, I will see."

"The delay worried me," the artist said, when he returned bringing not one but two portraits of His Holiness, "because I knew it would be necessary to compress within a few weeks work that should occupy six months. Besides the Pope's promise to sit for me, which he had made to Monsignor O'Hearn, there was to be noted in my favor that I had already painted portraits of his two predecessors and these pictures he must know. But all turned out happily: I reached Rome on September 1, waited until September 11, and left Rome with my two precious canvases on October 11. But I had painted, painted, painted every daylight moment of the interim.

"It did not take long to experience a feeling of ease in the presence of this dignified but amiable and democratic personage, after he had shown some interest in his portrait, which he did on the second day of our sittings. And the Pope explained the reason of this early indifference.

"I feel," said His Holiness, "that I am still too young a Pope to have so many likenesses of me given to the world."

Simple, modest, never relaxing in dignity but also never austere, talking easily on every sort of subject but always with thoughtful reserve and with deference to the opinions of others, my great sitter impressed me as being not only admirable but amazing.

"Filled with enthusiasm, I longed to be able to give him to posterity in a picture as real as that Pope Julius in the Pitti, painted by Raphael, one of the few great portraits of the world. I smile at myself for this grandiose ambition, knowing as I do my own quality and that my masters are not Raphael and his school but rather Velasquez, Titian and Franz Hals. But it does a painter no harm to feel a great admiration for his subject.

The Pope sent for me one morning to come to his library where he wished the sittings to be given. At once we had a little difference of opinion. There were three great windows in this room with cross lights which promised disaster while in the adjoining reception room, commonly called the throne room, there was only one great window. I wished to paint him there.

"The Pope yielded at once and said: 'You shall choose also the robes in which you wish to paint me. Matters are now in your hands.'

"As I aspired to paint him as the august Pope and again in a less formal way, I begged him to wear for the first picture what was customary in his reception of ambassadors. In this picture you see him therefore in white with a white baretta and a shoulder cape of violet toned velvet. On his right hand, holding an encyclical, is the sapphire papal ring. The left arm falls easily by his side. A tapestry forms the background of this picture. The Pope is seen in three quarters and the canvas measures forty by fifty inches. This picture is destined to go to the Catholic University at Washington.

"The second picture is a canvas twenty-four by twenty-seven, and shows the Pope less formally as when he received 20,000 pilgrims from various parts of Italy. He wore a hat as he entered the hall where

they assembled but immediately took it off. A feature of this second canvas is the cross he wore. This portrait is the property of the Archbishop of New York. It was preferred by the Pope to the other because in it he seems more simple. He said to me more than once:

"I do not prescribe, but I would wish to be presented to my fellow men as a man."

"And, in truth, it is as a man that Pius XI. impressed me. In his wide charity there could be nothing too small for him to observe and have a fellow feeling for. With a wonderful intellect trained in every kind of knowledge and with an unwonted imagination he is nevertheless a simple and modest person, kindness is in all his speech and actions and smile often lurks on his lips. It is but a suspicion of a smile, however.

"The Pope gave orders that a studio should be prepared for me in a room of my choice, airy and well lighted, and opposite the loggia where Raphael's famous cartoons are. In addition he offered to send there his ring and cross and such of his vestments as I needed in my painting, an offer that I gladly accepted. In this improvised studio I spent every day until the finish of my work from 7 in the morning to 7 at night. It was a *tour de force* I was attempting.

## The Pope's Interest in the Portrait.

"The Pope gave me sittings in the morning from 8:30 to 9:15 and sometimes even less. We were alone but never later than a quarter past nine, and too often sooner than that, his Secretary of State came for him and interrupted the sitting.

"I make no sketches, naturally, since I have been painting for so many years, and on the second day the head was already blocked in paint. The Pope looked at the canvas on that day and gave my work in its beginning his approval. I date from that day the awakening of his interest in it. For he said, as he gazed at the picture

at close range and then walked to a distance and looked at it again:

"It is strange, but the face looks like mine both near by and far off. It was not so in other cases. In one, although the painting at a distance looked as vivid as a work of Mancini, seen close by it was but a confused mass of paint.' Then he added:

"To-morrow, if you please, I shall ask my sister to come and look at the picture."

"The Pope spoke Italian to me always and as it is my native language, although in thirty years in America I have grown rather rusty in it, facility soon returned. Although he is a great linguist, speaking French, German, Spanish and many dialects of tongues he only comprehends English and does not speak it to any extent.

"His interest in the picture grew steadily. Finally he said to me:

"If it would help you why not arrange to see me in the afternoon as well as in the morning? I go every day for an hour's walk in the gardens—I get far too little exercise—or for a drive of an hour in a carriage, for I like it better than the automobile, and when I come back I feel so good, I am so fresh. It should be a better time for you."

"It was so arranged, and I had four sittings in the afternoon.

"The Pope at first talked little, and I was so absorbed in my task that I made no attempt to converse, nor indeed should I have done so without his lead. But at these afternoon meetings when his mind was doubtless freer from weighty matters than at the beginning of a day he talked a great deal and on almost every subject.

"On two occasions he made the remark that he wished to be known as a Pope easily accessible by any one who asked an audience, and without discrimination of creed and nationality. I cannot remember what incident in the day's news caused him to say this or another fine sentiment. As he never referred to politics it could

not have been inspired by other than a general longing. He said:

"I wish all men to feel that I am their brother, Jew or Mohammedan. The unrest of the world comes from the forgetfulness of this relationship, this brotherhood which will one day be universally acknowledged."

"The Pope asked me many questions about America, and especially about our great and ever growing New York. He said to me with a smile:

"I feel about your vast country as I imagine one inland bred may feel about the ocean. Perhaps if I should see America I might say with him about that ocean: Is this the mighty ocean, is there no more? But let him embark on it and lose land, then he realizes its immensity."

"It was of art and books, however, that he chiefly talked, and when we came to the end of the sittings and he had asked me to paint a portrait for himself it was with a view to be shown with a book in his hand. Said he:

"It is the natural way to paint me, for I have lived with books all my life, first in the great library of Milan and second as Cardinal Ratti, librarian of the Vatican. Never in my life have I been happier than among those old volumes of the Latinists, pouring over some crabbed text, fingering incunabula. Paint me, then, if you will be so good, as in the act of reading from a book by one of my faithful old friends."

Of course the artist promised to fulfill this commission and to make the picture, which is still to be painted. Mr. Muller-Ury asked permission to photograph the Pope's hand. The Pope granted the request and the artist at once produced his camera. A wonderful hand it is, the artist said.

## Sidelights on the Pope.

The Pope is a big, strong man, broad in the shoulders and at least 5 feet 9 inches in height. He is too stout and confesses the defect himself, but attributes it to too little exercise. His voice is sweet, but full and deep. Masculinity, in a word, in the artist's opinion, is a predominant trait.

"We talked constantly of art of which he knew and felt more deeply than myself. He had grown up surrounded by the best of human production in painting, sculpture, goldsmith's work, bronzes, what-not; he knows the history of them all and his perception of beauty includes the Greek remains and follows down to all that is remarkable in modern art. I think the Pope was amused when I told him Velasquez, and not some great Italian, was my god in painting, but he weighed my argument for the supremacy of the Spaniard and offered none in rebuttal or in support of his own predilection. The Pope is not argumentative and gives full weight to the preferences of others. He asked me if I did not feel like remaining to study the great masters in the Roman galleries and smiled when I said, 'No, I was running away from them.' Then he said:

"You exaggerate. One cannot run away from beauty any more than one can run away from life."

"The Pope's eyes are very wonderful, of a true sapphire blue, matching exactly his ring. On the day he received the 20,000 Italian pilgrims I knocked off work in order to be present at the ceremony. His blue eyes smiled at the people in a way that must have been reassuring, whatever their petition might have been. At this time he wore a scarlet cape of fine wool, lined with red silk over his cassock. The cape is the same one he wears when walking in the Vatican garden and is known in lay circles as the 'Pope's overcoat.'

"I should not like to give the impression of wishing to diminish the spirituality of the great personage who honored me with casual remarks in the progress of the sittings, but perhaps I would do well to add that this quality was ever present in his demeanor and speech. He manifested the highest human type, that of a deeply religious soul and a wise and benevolent mind, chary of prophecy. I thus paraphrase what he once let fall when he was discussing human wisdom and human folly. One expression I think I am able to translate exactly. It was this: 'Those that have the most wisdom have the most love.'

"Of his charity towards all who hold a different creed from that of the pious



The Painting for Catholic University.

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